

7 Little Ways To Feel A Sense Of Normalcy Right Now

Who isn't stressed over all this uncertainty? Here's how to find some stability during the COVID-19 pandemic and the election cycle.

By

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Let's just say what we all know is true: things are not “normal” right now and things won't look remotely “normal” for months to come. The [coronavirus pandemic](#) shows [no signs of slowing down](#) as we inch toward a cold winter, and post-election stress is adding an additional layer of unrest to an already unrestful year.

Normal days are something that many took for granted before all of this. [Lindsey McKernan](#), an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences professor at Tennessee's Vanderbilt University Medical Center, said the constants in our world create a rhythm for our day and ultimately build normalcy around us. And right now, the constants that we once knew are gone.

“When things are normal ... you don't have to put as much cognitive energy into anticipating what's next because it's the rhythm of the day,” McKernan said. “We're having to put so much additional cognitive effort into what's going on throughout the day.”

This additional cognitive effort contributes to increased stress levels across society, McKernan said. Establishing a sense of normalcy can help reduce the cognitive burden of the day and allow us to feel more in control of our own days.

But how exactly can we do that right now? Below, experts offer some of their best advice for creating a sense of normalcy as we continue through this far from normal time.

1. Establish a routine for yourself.

“When we're in a period of heightened stress, we are grounded by routine,” McKernan said.

That's why, in “regular times,” you might feel off if you go to bed later than usual or if you skip your weekend run. This year has been one huge version of that. There are many changes altering our normal routines.

McKernan said fighting those limitations that are now part of our day-to-day lives only adds to the struggle. Instead, we should embrace our current reality so we can appropriately respond and plan.

“The first thing when thinking about establishing a routine right now is redefining what that means and accepting that our sense of normal isn’t necessarily where we want it to be – and that’s OK. We have to work to intentionally re-establish a sense of routine,” she said.

McKernan recommended looking at four major things in order to adjust your routine: how you’re sleeping, how you’re eating, if you’re moving and to what extent you are able to socialize. Which of those areas could use some extra attention? (Maybe it’s all of them, which is understandable.) Start building your routine around those pillars.

That could look like going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. You may also want to try meal prepping as if you still needed to bring food into the office for lunch during the week. Maybe it’s calling your friend every Friday afternoon while you’re on a walk, or planning a cocktail night every weekend with your roommate. Whatever the case may be, build in small habits you can come to expect and make them something you can execute regularly.



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2. Take part in rewarding activities.

In the early days of the pandemic, many of us were all about “bettering ourselves” – whether that meant learning a new language or learning how to make sourdough. And while those activities were fun in the beginning, the practice of bread-baking and language-learning fizzled out for most. Now, we’re just trying to get through each day without losing it.

But there is something to taking on new activities as a way to create some normalcy – as long as you’re genuinely connected to them, McKernan said.

“When you choose activities that connect to things that you value in your life, that actually gives you a sense of reward and meaning,” she said, adding that these activities could be attending a virtual spiritual service, online volunteering, cooking, reading or knitting. Choose something that gets you excited or pulls you away from your stress.

“We might not be able to capture all activities in the way that we’re used to – for example, if you value fitness and you’re used to going to a hot yoga studio, that might not be safe to do right now,” McKernan said. “So, how can you recapture a little bit of that exercise in your life and in your day?”

These activities also lift your mood, which can be crucial as we move into winter, a time when [many are faced with lower mood](#).

“One of the things that can happen when our mood starts to get low is that we lose the motivation to do things. And, a lot of the time, we feel like we need to magically have the motivation back in order to re-engage in things,” McKernan said. “But it can work in the opposite way, too, where if you choose ... activities that are meaningful, you start to build back your sense of motivation and reward.”

3. Find creative ways to connect with loved ones.

A lot of the social aspects of our lives have been drastically altered in order to protect one another from the virus. [McLean Pollock](#), assistant professor of psychiatry at Duke University in North Carolina, noted that it’s hard to navigate how to socialize and feel close to loved ones without doing the things we’re used to, like handshaking, hugging and seeing people in person.

Pollock said that finding ways to connect with others is crucial in the search for normalcy. It will be hard to feel normal if one of our most basic needs – social connection – goes unmet throughout the remainder of this pandemic.

“This pandemic has led to some isolation. We can bridge that by making connections with other people because that is how we’re getting through this, together, even though it’s in a different way of being together,” she added.

But by now we’re used to scheduling Zoom calls and they can feel a little stale. [Janine Dutcher](#), a research scientist at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, suggested

finding more unique ways to connect with people. This encourages us to be creative, which can be rewarding in itself.

“I think that creativity can often be very difficult to engage in but it can be really rewarding too, because you found a way to beat the system, so to speak, and do something really fun and interesting,” she said.

Dutcher added that since the pandemic began, she has been writing loved ones letters and physically sending them in the mail. She has also conducted food exchanges with friends where she’ll order delivery dinner for a friend in another city from one of their favorite restaurants. The other friend will also return the favor for her.



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4. Decorate your home for seasonal celebrations.

While we can’t control the whole world, we can control our own microcosm, specifically our own home, Pollack said.

Decorating your home for seasonal celebrations with either store-bought items or handmade décor can help create a mile-marker for time within your own life. And, conveniently, a number of ideal-for-decorating holidays are approaching.

“Our days are bleeding into one another because we don’t have variation, so having something that can distinguish this time as different from other times can be helpful in creating that sense of normalcy and creating memories,” Pollock said.

5. Plan things for the future.

Having something to look forward to adds excitement to our days. And while our plans may have to look different for a while, we still can make them — whether that means a virtual happy hour or a fun night at home with your family.

“When you have something to look forward to, each day passes a little bit faster, particularly as you get closer to it — it’s one of those funny things about time perception. Looking forward to anything, even if it’s really simple, is very, very powerful,” Dutcher said.

Of course, this doesn’t give anyone permission to plan something that puts people at risk for contracting the virus.

“If you’re at home with family, you can plan for a fun movie night where you watch a movie, pop some popcorn and have some candy,” Dutcher suggested. She also added that, while spontaneous conversations with friends and family are nice, planned phone dates also hold their own type of power when it comes to generating some normalcy.

6. Accept that this is not a normal time.

Nothing about this period in our lives is regular. Our lives have been upended in many different ways and we are faced with uncertainty nearly every day.

“There is no magical solution, part of feeling a sense of normalcy is accepting that this is not normal and that these are really difficult and stressful times,” Pollock said.

“Recognize that that’s the context of trying to create some normalcy, first of all.” (In other words, cut yourself some slack.)

She added that we are all facing different difficulties as the pandemic, the election and the rest of the year unfolds and we need to adjust our normalcy to fit our own situation.

7. If you're still struggling, consider talking to a therapist.

Everyone's mental health has been put through the wringer this year, and things like routine setting, socializing and planning activities may not be enough to feel "normal" – and that is OK.

"If people are really struggling, it's always worth reaching out to a professional to make sure that they are getting the care and support that they need," Dutcher said.

Therapy can [help you navigate](#) our current reality and give you the coping skills to find a sense of normalcy among the chaos. Seeing a therapist can be incredibly expensive, [but there are affordable resources available that may help](#).

If the uncertainty is stressing you out to the point where it has been severely affecting your daily life, you don't have to manage it alone. You're also not the only one who feels this way.

"I think a lot of people are probably experiencing a low-level or even clinical-level of depression right now. I think it is, unfortunately, very common and people should be mindful and make sure they're taking care of their wellness."